INVITATION TO LIFE

April 28, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 John 4:7-12
John 15:1-11

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." -John 15:11 (NSRV)

There is a revolution going on, Time Magazine announced in a recent cover article. It is a quiet revolution at the moment and it is not universally visible, particularly if you live and move and have being here, in this neighborhood, or a neighborhood like it. Nevertheless Time reports that there are very major changes happening in the way Americans are thinking and behaving these days.

The title of the article is "The Simple Life." "Upscale is out. Downscale is in. Flaunting is gauche... if you've got it, please keep it to yourself, or give some away." The magazine proposes that we have tired of the socially acceptable greed of the 80s, that we gave ourselves to the ideology of wealth and acquisition and discovered at the end of the decade that it didn't deliver. We weren't any happier.

Time researchers report that:

* 70% of the people interviewed would like to slow down.

* 60% believe earning a living is so all-consuming they never get time to enjoy life.

* BMW sales are down 28%. Hondas are up 29%.

* "Dynasty" and "Falcon Crest" have been replaced by "Married...With Children," "Rosanne" and "The Simpsons." People who loved "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" are now watching "The Frugal Gourmet."

* Even divorce is down slightly.

Most of the dramatic examples were from the upscale colunmn: the 20% of the American people who benefited from the 80s.

Time's examples of people who have consciously chosen simpler life-styles were, frankly, people who could afford to - the $150,000 sales rep

who counted the bottles of motel shampoo on her shelf one night, quit her job and bought a grocery store; and the most visible of all, the investment superstar who one day walked away from the Fidelity Magellan Mutual Fund to be at home and make sandwiches for his school children, but walked away with fifty million dollars. Nevertheless, we do seem to be in a period of change. Even the social scientists are impressed. Time quoted Martin Marty, whose observations on American culture are consistently wise and on target, to the effect that we are perhaps in a "hinge period in the country's history."

The question raised by the excesses of the 80s and the current signs of change, of course, is an old one and an important one. It is the question behind all the philosophy in the world. It is:

> "How shall we live the brief span of time granted to us in a way that allows us to experience it fully, to get as much from it as we can? How can we live as thoroughly and productively as possible? How can we be happy? What is the secret to living a full and joyful life?"

It is not an academic matter. We can treat it abstractly but for most of us it is a question we ask and answer, in one way or another, in the decisions we make daily, decisions about how to use our time, our resources, our skills; decisions about giving ourselves to this person or that person, this cause or that cause; decisions which, in one way or another, have to do with our love.

Among the people who asked the question were the friends of Jesus of Nazareth around the year 33 A. D. The question had been prompted by their sense of the nearness of tragedy.

That situation was anything but joyful. It was the Last Supper. And in the Gospel of John what is said on the occasion is extensive. I have always thought someone must have asked something like, "Lord, what are we going to do now? What will we do after you're gone?"

In response, he told them four things:

First, he would be the source of their life; his love for them would continue, even after his death. They could count on that love, live in it; abide in him, is the way he put it.

Second, he told those frightened people sitting around he would live in them, abide in them, as they loved one another. "Like a vine and branches" is the way he put it. "I am the vine - you are the branches."

Third, this life of abiding in Jesus, and Jesus abiding in you is characterized, not by grim piety, nor other worldly spirituality, but by its fullness, and joy and productivity - again like a luxuriant vine.

And fourth, if you miss all this, if you don't learn to live in him by loving one another, it's a kind of non-life, a kind of dying, a kind of being discarded and thrown away like the pruned dead branches.

The mystery, the uniqueness, is his suggestion that the person who loves possesses divine life, God's life. Writing a letter some years later, John will say it plainly:

"If you love, God lives in you."

That's quite a claim.

So Jesus, as the 15th chapter of John conveys it, brings us close to the big philosophy question: "How shall we live?" and close actually to the current quiet revolution which is beginning in our own culture as a response to one set of answers which we now know didn't work.

"How shall we live?"

It's not that we intend to be unhappy. It's not that we mean to be less than fully alive, less than passionately absorbed in living every minute of the time granted us. It's not that we mean to be glum and resentful and frustrated so much of the time. It's just that over the years we get distracted.

> "'We are like travelers who set out on a trip with joy and clarity,' someone observed, 'but somewhere along the line we forget where we are going, and before long we are not aware of how far from life itself we have wandered.'"
> [Daybrook, A Contemplation Journal, April, 1991, p. 1]

Those massive, dramatic shifts Time Magazine reports, from fast track to the slow lane, from high-flying sales rep to grocery store owner, from superstar deal-maker to house-husband are, on the one hand, inspiring. They are, on the other hand, always a bit depressing because most of us aren't going to do anything quite like that because most of us can't, frankly.

We have not totally sold out to the culture of materialism and the gods of mammon. The simple fact is that it takes working all day even to live simply here and you cannot, most of us cannot, at least, work in business, law, medicine, at our own pace, at a schedule of our own devising.

There was a letter to the editor in this week's Time from an emergency room physician who said he wanted to slow down and live a simple life, but he had been on emergency room duty for thirty hours and another patient was being wheeled in. Thank God for him.

It is too easy to criticize, to look out at the world in which most of us live with disdain, with a terribly oversimplified moral arrogance, as a place where living means always meeting someone else's social standards, acquiring material satisfaction, and pursuing power and status. Let's not engage in that.

For most of us, the resolution, the accommodation, the reordering of priorities, the conversion if you will, will come from within, not outside the life we are living.

Jesus said there is a connection between the amount of love you have for others and the amount of the divine life that lives in you. And so, for many of us, it may not be so much a matter of walking away from our profession as it is paying attention to important matters and important people.

There is a haunting line of T. S. Eliot that goes:

"Where is the life we lost in living?"

It may be a matter of time - simply taking time for the important things; stopping the game many of us play, namely hiding behind our busyness, using our calendar as an excuse for not paying attention.

Michael Quoist, French priest, wrote a prayer years ago for all of us. It's a prayer about never having enough time and how life slips through your fingers:

> "I'd love to help you, I haven't time. I'll come back,
> I can't wait, I haven't time. I must end this letter...
> I can't accept. I can't think, I can't read, I'm swamped,
> I'd like to pray...
>
> "You understand, Lord, they simply haven't the time.
>
> "Lord, you must have made a big mistake in your calculations.
>
> "There is a big mistake somewhere,
> The hours are too short,
> The days are too short,
> Our lives are too short."
> [Prayers, p. 96-99]

If you don't love - which means paying attention to the things and the people that matter to you - it's a kind of death. If you don't love one another, Jesus told them, I can't abide in you; you will be cut off from the source of real life; you will be like the pruned branches of a once productive vine.

James Baldwin, who wrote so beautifully about life and love, observed one time:

> "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we
> break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and
> the light goes out."
> [Nothing Personal, cited by Dan Wakefield, in
> "Notes of Native Son," in G.Q., August 1988]

Sometimes it takes a tragedy to teach us that. If you have experienced the sharp, unrelenting pain of grief, you know how isolating it is and how alone you feel. And, hopefully, you also know how healing and literally life-giving the presence and touch and caring of other people can be.

Dan Wakefield tells about it in a recent book, The Story of Your Life. His bestseller, Returning, chronicles his own spiritual journey, and

now Wakefield is spending a lot of his own time on the important matters. He is still a very successful author - working on a new novel about New York City in the fifties. He is also an unapologetic churchman. Near the end of his latest book he relates the story of a free-lance writer whose brother had just died of AIDS.

She had gone to a healing service at King's Chapel, Wakefield's church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

> "It was for people in pain. Much to my surprise, there was a part of the service that included the laying on of hands for people who felt they needed it. Much to my surprise, I went forward rationalizing that, if other animals besides humans surround themselves by their kind in times of trouble, it was okay for me to do the same. As the minister put his hands on my head, two other people from the congregation closed in around me, and I let them absorb my hurt.
>
> "'I will tell you this,' she said, 'I am not quite sure what we are supposed to discover here on earth, but I am quite convinced that we are supposed to discover it together.'"

Jesus promised that as his friends learned to love each other, he would live in them. He made an extravagant claim, namely that this is the secret; this is how any of us can live our lives fully. It is the way the miracle of joy happens in the middle of life.

Many of us are waiting for it to happen, waiting for the mystery and power of God to be revealed to us perhaps like a lightning bolt out of the blue, or sitting under the influence of a charismatic preacher, or in the searching, probing discipline of private prayer. But Jesus said it is often right in front of us, or perhaps more accurately, within us, in our hearts: that place within us where we are capable of love - for him, for life, for families, and friends and dearest ones and neighbors.

Hear it then, as a blessed invitation to live. Hear his words to his friends 2,000 years ago as the secret for which you have been searching:

"Abide in me," he said, and "I will abide in you and your joy will be full." Amen.

+ + + + + +

Dear God, love us in all our pride and stubborn resolution. Love us in our vulnerability and weakness. Love us in our grim determination to succeed. Love us so that we begin to love and to live and to know the fullness of the joy you promised in Jesus our Lord. Amen.